Bullying: Effects and Intervention

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Introduction:

Almost everybody can tell a story or two about having been victimized by a bully in school. In addition, bullying should not be treated as something that is common for students to experience as they get older, and as a rite of passage. It should be addressed as something that can limit academic learning and cause irreversible psychological damage (Hillsberg & Spak, 2006).

Bullying occurs at places and times when adult supervision and surveillance is minimal like in hallways and playgrounds (Graham, 2010, p.66).

There are several types of bullying which occur in schools daily. Physical bullies often resort to violence against their victims by either hitting, kicking and shoving others. Verbal bullies use words to harm others through name-calling, insulting, and harsh teasing. Relational bullies focus on excluding a person from their peer group and usually do so by spreading rumors about that person. Finally, reactive bullies are individuals who are often both bully and victim, typically victim first, and who respond to being victimized with bullying behavior (Milsom & Gallo, 2006; Beran & Shapiro, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Bullying is a serious social problem affecting many schools around the world. However, it was not until the 1970s that it became the object of systematic research. As a result of bullying, victimized children tend to suffer from depression and anxiety, as well as want to keep to themselves. Another serious effect that bullying has is interrupting classroom environment, and creating an uncomfortable and hostile environment where students cannot focus on their learning. Furthermore, their academic performance is hindered (Barone 1997; Farrington,1993; Olweus 1995; Siris & Osterman 2004; Guerra et al. 2011; Smith et al., 2005; Williams & Kennedy, 2012).

Review of Literature

Dan Olweus (1995) defines bullying as an incident where “a student is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students” (p. 197). Olweus extended the definition used by P. Heinemann in 1973. For instance, Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, and Liefooghe (2002) stated that Heinemann was one of the first to write on bullying, and used the Norwegian term “mobbning, referring to group violence against a deviant individual that occurs suddenly and subsides suddenly” (p. 1119).

Negative actions against a victim include physical contact, words, making faces, and intentionally excluding the victim from a peer group. In addition, Olweus (1995) states that the victim often has difficulty defending himself or herself, and that there is an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim. Furthermore, Olweus describes victims as anxious, insecure, sensitive, and quiet. They also suffer from low self-esteem. Williams and Kennedy (2012) also discuss the negative effects of bullying and state that “peer victimization can result in devastating consequences for children and adolescents [indicating] an association between peer victimization and internalizing symptoms” (p.321). For instance, the authors also indicate that as a result of bullying “bullied children have a lower sense of self-efficacy, their academic achievement tends to be lower than their peers” (p. 322).

Jenson and Dieterich (2007) indicate that approximately 25% of elementary school students engage in bullying or are victims of bullying during elementary school. In addition, boys commit direct or physical acts of bullying at higher rates than girls, and girls are more likely to be involved in indirect forms of bullying such as excluding others from social activities and spreading rumors. Farrington (1993) also discusses the negative effects of bullying by claiming that verbal and relational bullying is something that is common amongst youngsters at the age of 6 and 7, and that bullies at 7 years old often continue to be bullies as they grow older. These findings show that it is important to address bullying at a young age, as the problem can only escalate through the years. Both bullies and victims experience depression as they grow older. Furthermore, victimization is associated with poor academic performance, and both bully and victim have poor psychological and social outcomes.

Smith, Cousins, and Stewart (2005) indicate that bullying is a vicious kind of peer-on peer aggression which involves multiple peers. For instance, they state that bullying should no longer be viewed as a dyadic interaction between a perpetrator and victim, and identified a variety of roles that peers can play in bullying situations such as assistants who help the bully commit the act, reinforcers who provide verbal encouragement to the bully who is committing the act, and onlookers who although are not directly engaged in the bullying, are an audience for the bully (p.741).

Research by Oliver and Candappa (2007) shows that unfortunately, many students who are bullied in schools do not report this to their teachers or parents, and often when a bullying incident occurs, a teacher does not intervene to stop the incident from occurring. Hence, it has been argued by Oliver and Candappa (2007) that “bullies benefit from the silence, and bullied pupils may not get the support they need” (p. 72). Furthermore, authors Atlas and Pepler (1998) mention that “bullying is often referred to as the silent nightmare because there is a code of secrecy whereby victimized students and witnesses to bullying do not report the act,” allowing bullying to increase (p. 88). Surveys of students in primary and secondary schools have repeatedly shown that a large amount of bullied students are reluctant to inform adults that have been victimized. Children who have been bullied have also expressed reluctance to confide in their parents, because they feel ashamed, rejected, and do not want to worry their parents. However, when children do report a bullying incident, they are more likely to tell their parents or friends rather than tell school staff (Oliver & Candappa, 2007, p.73).

Furthermore, Olweus (1995) describes a bully as not only exhibiting aggression towards their peers, but to adults (teachers and parents) as well. One of the things that Olweus (1995) discusses is the lack of empathy bullies have for their victims. Hence, it is important that educators teach students about respecting others, and about being able to identify with their classmates and imagine how it would be if they were to be bullied. Olweus (1995) further notes that bullying can have a negative impact on classroom environment, and it is “thus important to try to create a school environment characterized by warmth, positive interest, and involvement from adults” (p.199). When a child senses danger, often that child cannot focus on learning. Hence, Olweus talks about a direct connection bullying has on classroom and school environment, indicating that providing intervention strategies for bullying is essential for educators and all school personnel. Olweus’ bullying intervention program was designed to battle bullying at three levels, classroom level, school wide level, and individual level, integrating parents, teachers, and all students involved in bullying. According to Cross et al. (2011), “whole-of-school universal interventions are the most effective, non-stigmatizing means to reduce bullying behavior” (p.106). Furthermore, Cross et al. (2011) states that the “Olweus Bullying Prevention Program targeting students, teachers and parents, which demonstrated reductions in bullying behavior of around 50% in Bergen, Norway” (p. 107).

As an educator, it is imperative that we make our students aware of the serious effects of bullying and show them ways of handling a bullying situation if they witness one, and different coping strategies for victims who have been bullied. Furthermore, the lack of empathy displayed in bullies who victimize children indicates that there should be more of an emphasis on implementing intervention strategies such as character education in schools to stop this problem.

Berkowitz and Bier (2004) discuss that character education can be effective in improving “academic achievement, prosocial behavior, bonding to school, prosocial and democratic values, conflict-resolution skills, moral-reasoning maturity, responsibility, respect, self-efficacy, self-control, self-esteem, social skills, and trust in and respect for teachers” (p.75). As a result, classroom environment can improve and bullying incidents can decrease. Although character education is effective, many educators have not been trained in how to implement character education in their classrooms, and do not have support from a principal to implement it in their classroom (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, p. 77). Furthermore, another factor that influences the effectiveness of character education is how students perceive their classroom community. If students think of their community as positive, they are less likely to become aggressive or a bully, and less likely to become withdrawn or a victim (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Siris & Osterman, 2004).

For instance, O’Sullivan (2004) believes that integrating character education with the curriculum can influence student behavior for the better. Specifically, using children’s literature for character education can provide rules and morals for students to live by. Like O’Sullivan, Hillsberg and Spak (2006) believe that literature that deals with the terrible consequences of bullying can help the victim and the bully. For instance, the authors state that “the victim may derive comfort or coping strategies from reading about another in a similar situation. In addition, the bully might begin to identify with a fictional victim, leading to empathy and the possibility for change (Hillsberg and Spak, 2006, p. 25).

O’Sullivan (2004) states that “stories provide good role models for behavior as well as rules to live by” (p. 641). For instance, a teacher can ask students to reflect on the positive behavior traits of the characters, as well as the negative traits they see conveyed in each story. O’Sullivan (2004) gives the example of Cinderella, and how an educator can use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast Cinderella with her stepsisters. This will help students see what traits and behaviors are important, and which ones can have harmful effects on others. For instance, developmentally appropriate literature that addresses the topic of bullying and is relevant to students’ lives can serve as example of what values a person should exhibit. Students can be able to identify with the protagonist and relate their own experiences of being bullied with the character (O’Sullivan, 2004, p. 642). Students who are victims may even learn different coping strategies from reading about another character in a similar situation as them. In addition, the bully might begin to identify with the fictional victim, leading to him or her developing empathy, and changing for the better. Like O’Sullivan, Barone (1997) believes that reading stories to students can help them become aware of the negative effects of bullying. In addition, Barone (1997) believes that integrating role playing in schools allows students to reverse the role of bully and victim, leading to an increase in empathy.

In addition, according to Munoz, Qualter, and Padgett (2010), the authors discuss that bullies are deficient in affective empathy, which is one’s ability to understand the feelings of the people around them.

Cletus R. Bulach (2002) believes that bullying is one of the leading causes in violence in schools today. Bulach believes that educators should make every attempt to model positive character behaviors such as forgiveness, sympathy, and kindness. Bulach seems to be influenced by Dan Olweus’ intervention program that calls for involving entire faculty and staff to intervene against bullying. Only by involving everyone does Bulach believe intervention will have the chance to be successful. Bulach conducted a survey for both parents and teachers in grades K- 12 to figure out what character traits and behaviors should be taught in schools. Parents and teachers are given the opportunity to rank behaviors in order of importance using the 5-point Rikert Scale, 1 being the least important, and 5 being the most important. In addition, Bulach encourages teachers to focus on two behaviors every week in school, and have discussions with students about why these behaviors are important.

Other intervention strategies against bullying call for a school wide, zero approach to bullying that involves entire faculty, parents, and staff. Theorists who believed in school wide intervention were Dan Olweus and Erling Roland of Norway. Roland, Bru, Midthassel, and Vaaland (2008) developed the “Zero Programme” aimed to reduce bullying occurrences, and calls for zero tolerance to bullying. Roland believes that bullying often occurs because of the lack of teacher intervention and control of bullying incidents. Hence, the “Zero Programme,” stresses that all staff members at a school work together to model positive behaviors to students. The goal of the program is to make students develop empathy towards their peers, indicating that the lack of empathy is a reason for bullying occurrences. Teachers meet with the victim and with every bully involved in the incident individually to discuss the situation. Parents are notified about the incident immediately. Furthermore, there are also follow-up meetings with the bullies and victim to ensure that the bullying has stopped. Roland’s program tries to get everyone involved in order to spread awareness about bullying. Both Olweus and Roland use questionnaires and surveys to learn about students’ bullying experiences and what they already know about bullying.

Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) also discuss that empathy is one of the leading causes of bullying and state that bullies have little empathy with victims of bullying. The authors refer to Endersen’s Empathic Questionnaire and Olweus’ Bullying Questionnaire administered in Norway which showed a significant correlation between low empathy and bullying (Joliffe & Farrington, 2006, p. 541).

Role playing is another intervention strategy that can be used to battle bullying. Like O’Sullivan, Barone (1997) believes that reading stories to students can help them become aware of the negative effects of bullying. In addition, Quinn et al. (2003) states that role playing allows students to reverse the role of bully and victim, leading to an increase in empathy and would allow a bully to imagine what it feels like to be bullied and disrespected, and hopefully make them think about how their actions can harm others.

Another intervention strategy that educators overlook is one that includes bystanders who witness bullying and are affected by the incident just as much as the victims have been affected. Polanin, Espelage, and Pigott (2012) indicate that intervention strategies against bullying should also focus on bystanders who witness a bullying incident. Polanin et al. (2012) indicate “more than 80% of the time an observer witnesses victimization” (p. 47). This also dispels the myth that bullying involves only the perpetrator and the victim.

Graham (2012) indicates that other peers are present as either bystanders, assistants to bullies, and reinforcers, and hence, when implementing an intervention strategy, one must take everyone under consideration. Like Graham, Atlas et al. (1998) reports that boys and girls are bullied at the same rate and peers are involved in some capacity by either actively participating in the bullying incident or passively onlooking. Hence, the results show that bullying occurs in a peer context and that it is related to the individual characteristics of children involved in bullying.

Cowie (2011) believes that because bullying includes a variety of peers, integrating an intervention strategy that provides peer support will be beneficial for all those involved in a bullying incident. Peer support takes the form of defending through training in how to respond to a peer’s distress. Peer support focuses on befriending schemes, peer mediation, and active listening. In a befriending scheme, students are trained to offer their friendship to another student. In peer mediation, peers are trained to bring the bully and the victim together to resolve their difficulties. Finally, in active listening, peer supporters are trained in counseling skills as a way of providing emotional support to bullied children. Furthermore, peer support methods educate students to take responsibility for their own actions, and provide training in interpersonal, social and conflict resolution skills. For peer support to be effective, students should be encouraged and trained to consult with the entire student body to figure out what problems the school faces by conducting surveys (Cowie, 2011, p. 288).

**Research Hypothesis 1**: Implementing role playing and reading stories about character education to six, first grade students at Private School X in Jamaica, Queens, three times a week, for 50 minutes over a three week period during late morning, will improve classroom environment and decrease bullying occurrences.

**Method**

**Participants (N)**: The participants will consist of a group of 6 first grade students from Private School X, in Jamaica, Queens. There are 4 boys and 2 girls (4 Caucasian students, 1 African American student, and 1 Asian student in all.

* 1 principal
* 1 teacher

**Instrument(s):**

The students will be observed over a three week period, three times a week, for 50 minutes during late morning to see if bullying behavior has decreased or not. They will take one survey before intervention and one after intervention. In addition, students will create role-playing skits, and teacher will record observation logs of behavior over the course of this three week period.

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**Appendix A: Principal Consent Form**

November 25, 2012

Dear Principal Panos,

As you are probably well aware of, I am presently completing my graduate program in Childhood Education (1-6) at Brooklyn College. This semester I have been asked to conduct an action research project within the classroom. The research project is designed to reduce the amount of bullying incidents that occur within my classroom and to improve classroom environment. I plan to pass out surveys and questionnaires to my first grade students in order to gain a better understanding of what their experiences with bullying are, and to learn about what they already know about bullying. The surveys and questionnaires require that I choose a few students, and after acquiring parental permission, gather information from them regarding bullying. Students are to complete the surveys and questionnaires over a three week period. To preserve their privacy, the actual names of the individuals will not be used, and the school’s name will not be used either.

These surveys will in no way affect my duties as an educator but rather the information acquired may prove useful in helping me understand and be able to implement various ways to reduce the occurrences of bullying within my classroom. Thus, improving classroom environment and preserving academic excellence. I am asking for your consent to conduct these surveys within our school. Thank you in advance for your support in this endeavor.

Sincerely,

Mary Zoulis-Lathourakis

I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ have read and understand the information provided above. I

Principal Signature

willingly agree to allow my school to participate in this research project.

**Appendix B: Consent Form to Parents**

November 25, 2012

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am currently a graduate student at Brooklyn College, and am in the process of completing an action research project. I would like to invite your child to participate in a Comparative Research Study that will be conducted during the school year over a three week period. The research project is designed to reduce the amount of bullying incidents that occur within my classroom and to improve classroom environment. I plan to pass out surveys and questionnaires to students in order to gain a better understanding of what their experiences with bullying are, and to learn about what they already know about bullying. The surveys and questionnaires require that I choose a few students, and after acquiring parental permission, gather information from them regarding bullying. Students are to complete the surveys and questionnaires over a three week period. To preserve their privacy, the actual names of the individuals will not be used, and the school’s name will not be used either.

Therefore, I would deeply appreciate if you would grant your child permission to participate in this research study. I would like to assure you that if you decide to allow your child to participate, any information that is obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. The participants and their school will remain anonymous.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me via email at [maryzoulis@gmail.com](mailto:maryzoulis@gmail.com) . Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Mary Zoulis-Lathourakis

**Appendix C: Survey before Intervention**

1. Bullying is a problem in our school

4 - Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2- Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. I have been bullied at school.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2- Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

3. When I am bullied, I should go tell the teacher or another adult right away.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. There are NO rules against bullying in our school.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. If I am bullied, I believe one of my classmates will step in and help me.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. If I see someone being bullied, I will step in to help them.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. I have stepped in to help a person being bullied before.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. There is someone at home I can talk to if I am bullied or have seen someone being bullied.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. There are NO adults at school I can talk to if I am bullied.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. Teasing and bullying are the same thing.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

**Appendix D: Survey after Intervention**

Thank you very much for taking your time to complete this survey. Remember, do NOT put your name on this survey.

Circle ONE: Are you Male or Female?

Age:

What is your race?

African American/Black \_\_\_\_ Caucasian/White \_\_\_\_ Hispanic/Latino \_\_\_\_

Multi-racial \_\_\_\_ Asian \_\_\_\_ American Indian/Alaskan Native \_\_\_\_

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander \_\_\_\_ Other – please write in: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. I have learned a lot about bullying after reading stories and role playing.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. If I see someone being bullied, I will step in to help the student.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. If I see someone being bullied, I will let a teacher or an adult know.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. I think about people’s feelings and do not want to do anything/say anything to hurt them.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

5. I have noticed a decrease in bullying in our classroom.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. I believe I should be kind to everyone.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. I should respect everyone in the classroom.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. I know what to do in a bullying situation.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree

1. I know ways to handle being bullied.

4- Strongly Agree 3- Agree 2-Somewhat agree 1- Do not agree